

St. Mary's Roman Catholic Yard, Church  
1401 5th Avenue  
Fourth Ward Neighborhood  
Altoona  
Blair County  
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-5847-A

HABS  
PA,  
7-ALTD,  
80-A-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HABSP  
PA  
7-ALTO.  
80-A-

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

ST. MARY'S ROMAN CATHOLIC YARD, CHURCH

HABS No. PA-5847-A

Location: 1401 5th Avenue

Date of Erection: 1871-83

Description: This simple brick church, with a center-steeple and a gable front has a square tower with gabled crest and eight-sided spire that projects slightly from the front wall of the building. Stained-glass windows in the front and sides, as well as the louvered lanterns in each tower face, have pointed Gothic arches with molded brick surrounds. The main Fifth Avenue entrance into the steeple originally had a similar arch, although it is now filled in, and first-floor doors and windows have been replaced with glass-and-steel versions.

Other decoration includes overall patterned corbelling in the brick, modest buttressing between bays on the side walls and at the tower, and the use of copper trim on the steeple. A second vestibule entrance is provided on the 14th Street facade.

The interior of this church has been significantly altered. The sanctuary, as was common in older churches, is located on the second floor. An added balcony and other altered doors and entryways obstruct many original stained-glass windows, some of which have been shortened. Marble-panelled walls, track lighting, and heating vents over the windows, as well as a bare altar and an unpainted wood crucifix figure at the front, make for a plainness uncharacteristic of many Catholic churches. The original decorative statues for the stations of the cross survive with their German-language legends.

History: In 1855 a small group of German families in Altoona, then worshipping at the English-speaking St. John's Church, first petitioned the Pittsburgh Diocese for a German-speaking pastor. The congregation was organized in 1860 and construction of a church was begun in that year. As a church-prepared history relates, the building was erected by church members after their day's work at the railroad shops. Officially named the Immaculate Conception Parish, St. Mary's was dedicated in December 1860.

The present brick structure was built in stages. The rear half was erected against the wall of the original wood structure and was dedicated in June 1872. Economic recession delayed completion of the front until 1883. The congregation numbered 2,000 at that time.

Steel-framed, glass doors were added in 1960 when the exterior of the church building was redecorated. Glass brick windows were installed in the school at that time. The present sanctuary dates from 1968 when it was remodeled in response to the directives of Vatican II. The work was supervised by George A. Friedrichs Company of Erie.

St. Mary's is surrounded by a number of affiliated parish buildings: a parochial school was begun as early as 1864 and the present brick St. Mary's School on 4th Avenue was built in 1889 on the site of a frame schoolhouse. The present convent building, housing the Sisters of St. Agnes, a Wisconsin-based order, is also on 4th Avenue; the gambrel-roofed, brick structure was built in 1903, enlarged in 1924, and recently received extensive alteration. The mansard-roofed, brick rectory adjoining the church at 1405 5th Ave. was built by 1909. In 1949, another church-related structure, Memorial Hall--a multi-purpose center dedicated to parish members who served in WWII--was built, also on 4th Avenue. It incorporated an older YMCA building and was designed by the Altoona architectural firm of Hunter, Caldwell & Campbell and was supervised by the Moyer Brothers.

Sources: Maps: 1882, 1888. Africa, 179. Altoona Tribune (January 15, 1916). Illustrated Altoona, 84-85. "St. Mary's Parish--How it Started," Altoona Mirror clippings file; Altoona Mirror (September 26, 1936; October 3, 1940; August 11, 1941; August 23, 1943; July 29, 1949; August 5, 1949, August 5, 1960; August 17, 1960; July 22, 1968). Catholic Register (August 20, 1949). Art Work of Blair County, 1893.

Project Information: This report was part of a larger project to document the city of Altoona, Pennsylvania. The project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record

ST. MARY'S ROMAN CATHOLIC  
YARD, CHURCH  
HABS No. PA-5847-A (Page 2)

(HABS/HAER), Robert Kapsch, chief, at the request of America's Industrial Heritage Project (AIHP), Randy Cooley, director. Overviews of the history of the city (HABS No. PA-5784) and the fourth ward neighborhood (HABS No. PA-5786) provide context for these buildings as well as a comprehensive list of sources. See also additional HABS reports on buildings in the city and other neighborhoods.

This report was prepared by Susan Garfinkel in the summer of 1989 under the supervision of HABS senior historian Alison K. Hoagland and Kim E. Wallace, supervisory historian. Garfinkel's and other project historians' work was published as Railroad City: Four Historic Neighborhoods in Altoona, Pennsylvania (Washington, D.C.: HABS/HAER, National Park Service, 1990), edited by Kim E. Wallace, supervisory historian, and Sara Amy Leach, HABS historian.